

FORT NORFOLK

NORFOLK, VIRGINIA
Circa 1810

Step back in time . . .

Shortly after Lord Dunmore bombarded Norfolk from his ships on January 1, 1776, the governing body of the Commonwealth of Virginia, residing in Williamsburg, ordered the construction of Forts Norfolk and Nelson. Fort Nelson being directly across from Fort Norfolk was constructed on the site now occupied by the Portsmouth Naval Hospital. Fort Norfolk is currently home to the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers for the Norfolk District and is but a few months younger than the Corps which was established in June, 1775.

Virginia forces were sent North in the spring of 1776 to aid General Washington and were therefore unable to effectively man the forts. In May of 1779, when Sir George Collier sailed into the Elizabeth River with a large British fleet, the forts could not offer any resistance. After the Revolutionary War ended, the old Virginia state fort fell into disrepair. It was not until May of 1795 that Fort Norfolk again received attention.

In March, 1794, Congress authorized President Washington to build forts to protect a number of U.S. harbors. In 1795, the Federal government bought four and one third acres of land which included the dilapidated old fort from Edward and Sarah Poole for two hundred pounds sterling.

Henry Knox, Secretary of War under President Washington, appointed John Jacob Ulrich Rivardi as temporary U.S. Engineer to construct the fortifications. The fort became a strong earth-walled defense for Norfolk.

Then, in 1802, Secretary of War, Henry Dearborn ordered that the fort once more be abandoned.

On the twenty-second of June 1807, the U.S. Frigate Chesapeake sailed out of Norfolk to relieve the USS Constitution in the Mediterranean. The Chesapeake was ill prepared to handle the action it was about to encounter.

Her Captain had been senior officer for only one day, the crew was shorthanded and untrained, her decks were full of unstowed gear, and her powder was stored below. Obviously, the Chesapeake was not prepared for battle this early in the voyage.

As the Chesapeake passed a British squadron of ships anchored in the Lynnhaven Bay, one ship, the HMS Leopard raised it's sails and gave chase to the Chesapeake. For almost forty miles the two ships sailed side by side. Then, the Leopard laid a trap. First sailing past, then slowing, then sending a boarding party to the Chesapeake. The boarding party was repelled. The Leopard then opened fire on the Chesapeake, killing three and wounding sixteen sailors, including the Captain.

The Chesapeake was unable to defend itself. The colors were struck, indicating the Chesapeake's surrender. The British boarding party returned to the Chesapeake and removed four men, three accused of being deserters from the British Navy.

The citizens of Norfolk were infuriated by the war-like actions of the British ship. Anticipating further trouble, the citizens of Norfolk joined with the local military to rebuild the Fort. When further congressional funding was received circa 1810, the Fort was totally rebuilt. The exterior brick walls and interior buildings were constructed.

In July of 1808, the Governor of Virginia was advised by Thomas Matthews, a Norfolk citizen leading the repair effort, that "... the Fort is in excellent order". There were a total of nine eighteen pound cannons and large quantities of gunpowder and stores.

All remained quiet around Norfolk until 1812 when the regular army was ordered north toward Canada. Fort Norfolk was then occupied by untrained militia. The few remaining regulars provided artillery training to the locals.

General Robert Barrand Taylor of the Virginia Militia, was appointed commander of the Fort from 1812 to 1814. In February of 1813, a British squadron entered the Capes to blockade the Chesapeake Bay. The U.S. Frigate Constellation managed to reach the safety of Fort Norfolk without harm as she raced ahead of the British ships. The Constellation remained in Norfolk until the war's end. Fort Norfolk never fired a single shot at the enemy in anger during the war. Nevertheless, misfortune took its toll. Dr. D. J. Clairbourne, surgeon of the 4th Virginia Regiment of Volunteers reported to Governor Barbour, "an epidemic of bilious fever", in September of 1812.

In 1824 the single soldier assigned to the Fort essentially as a caretaker was recalled to Fortress Monroe.

In 1834 the Federal government stripped the Fort bare except for the buildings. A squatter named Lemuel Fentress found the Fort deserted in the late eighteen-forties.

When he was eventually discovered by an Army Captain, Fentress demanded that the War Department reimburse him \$1,500 for "taking care of the government's work". No one knows whether or not he was ever paid.

In 1849 the U.S. Navy moved into the Fort to use it as an ammunition depot. The Navy removed one major building, several smaller structures, and the hornwork, and in 1856 completed the large magazine.

Essentially, the Fort appears today as it did during the Navy period. As the Civil war approached, State militia troops occupied the Fort. Confederate General Taliaferro set up a battery of fifteen guns in May of 1861.

When Norfolk was evacuated by the Confederates in May of 1862, the Federal forces resumed control of the Fort and used it as a prison until March of 1863. The Fort was then returned to the U.S. Navy. It remained a naval installation until 1878.

In 1921, the Fort was turned-over to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and was used until 1983. At that time the Corps moved into its new building outside the Fort's brick walls. On May 3, 1992, the Fort was opened to the public under the watchful eyes of the Norfolk Historical Society (NHS). Restoration is once again underway by the benevolent citizens of Norfolk.



The Norfolk Historical Society needs your help.

With vision and imagination, Fort Norfolk can bring to life a forgotten era of our history. Visitors of all ages will be able to step back in time through the fort's entrance arch.

You can become part of the excitement by volunteering time, talent, and yes, it will take money. But more than anything, at this time Fort Norfolk needs people who can lend their special talents to the revitalization of this living treasure. For more information about Fort Norfolk and you, contact:

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FORT NORFOLK CHRONOLOGY

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| ★ 1776 | Commonwealth of Virginia orders Fort Norfolk to be established to protect the town. |
| ★ 1794 | Congress authorizes President George Washington to construct a number of forts to protect U.S. harbors, including Fort Norfolk. |
| ★ 1802 | Secretary of War Henry Dearborn orders the Fort abandoned. |
| ★ 1807 | Local military and citizens of Norfolk join together to repair Fort Norfolk after the Chesapeake - Leopard affair. |
| ★ 1810 | Brick walls and most structures built. |
| ★ 1812 | Local militia replaces regular army sent north. |
| ★ 1824 | Single remaining soldier serving as caretaker returns to Fort Monroe. |
| ★ 1834 | Government abandons Fort. |
| ★ 1840 | Lemuel Fentress becomes Fort resident and self-appointed caretaker. |
| ★ 1850 | U.S. Navy converts Fort to ammunition depot. |
| ★ 1856 | The large magazine is completed. |
| ★ 1861 | Confederate General Taliaferro takes command of Fort and sets up battery as civil war is declared. |
| ★ 1862 | Norfolk evacuated by Confederates and occupied by Federal troops. Fort Norfolk becomes a Federal prison. |
| ★ 1863 | Returned to U.S. Navy for ammunition storage. |
| ★ 1880 | Navy vacates Fort. |
| ★ 1921 | Turned over to Army Corps of Engineers. |
| ★ 1983 | Army Corps of Engineers moves to new building. |
| ★ 1991 | Corps awards Norfolk Historical Society (NHS) license to operate Fort Norfolk. |
| ★ 1992 | Fort Norfolk opens to the public. |

*Donated by
The Medical College of Hampton Roads*

FOOT NOTES ... a walking tour of the Fort

1 MAIN GATE AND GUARD HOUSE (Circa 1810)

The main gate or "sallyport" has provided access to the Fort for over 180 years. The large green oak doors are original. Each door is suspended from a single iron hinge. Over the gate is the guard house. From this vantage point, the guard house had a clear view of the Elizabeth River and the approach to the towns of Norfolk and Portsmouth. Passing through the gates, a small opening with bars can be seen on the right of the archway, this allowed sentries posted on the gate to watch any prisoners which might be held in the tiny jail.

2 JAIL/DUNGEON/ BLACK HOLE/MAGAZINE (Circa 1810)

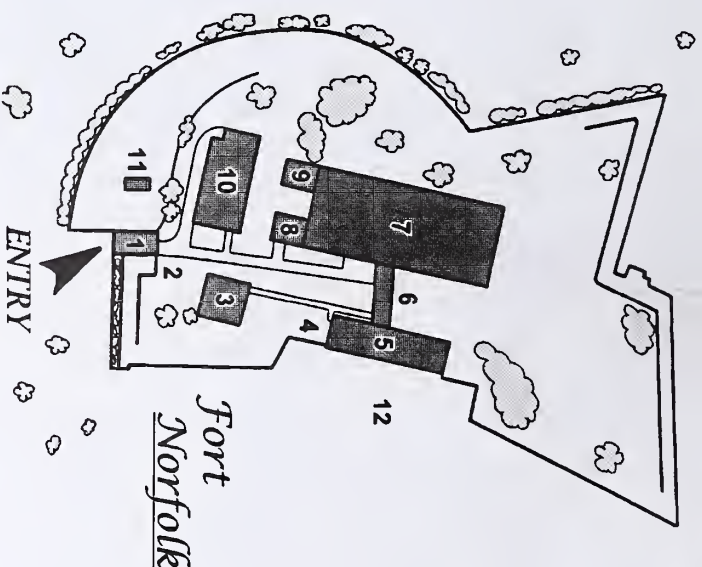
It was sometimes necessary when soldiers misbehaved to lock them up. This is the entrance to the dungeon, or "black hole". Four deserters of the War of 1812 were held in this hole for execution by firing squad. Only one of the four men was actually executed. Originally, this was a magazine for storing powder and shot.

3 STOREHOUSE (Circa 1810)

Now the home and headquarters of the Norfolk Historical Society, this building was constructed as a storehouse. It is a two story building which originally contained "one ground room and one upper room." The lower level now houses several artifacts, exhibits and numerous books.

4 ICE BOX (Circa 1810)

Built into and under the rampart is an old fashioned ice box "large enough to preserve meat for a small army." Originally, this too was a magazine from the early 1810 construction.



5 HEADQUARTERS BUILDING/ ORDNANCE ASSEMBLY & STORAGE (Circa 1810)

In 1824 this building was inventoried as follows:

"A substantial two story building for officers quarters containing four ground and four upper rooms with cellars and outhouse. Locks and latches taken from the doors, some window shutters taken away - some sashes and plastering slightly injured and glass broken - otherwise in good order."

This building has served numerous other functions over the years. Extensive renovation and conversion to an ordnance assembly/storage building by the Navy occurred around 1850 to 1855. Looking at the building it can be seen many of the windows and doors were relocated.

6 CONNECTING WALKWAY (Circa 1856)

At the time the Navy occupied the Fort, this covered walkway was constructed to join ordnance assembly to the magazine, providing shelter during inclement weather. Today's visitors are invited to use the walkway area and picnic tables for a leisurely family picnic on any one of our warm and sunny Sundays.

7 MAGAZINE (Circa 1856)

When the Navy was awarded the use of the Fort (about 1849), it became an ammunition depot for U.S. Navy ships. The magazine is 100 feet long and about 50 feet wide. The walls are 4' 3" thick, of brick covered with hewn stone. There are only two doors: the front door which is the original door, with its copper hasp and hinges; and the rear door, which is not an original doorway. During the renovation of the Fort by the Navy, several original buildings were removed including a brick barrack similar to 10, a magazine, a shot furnace, and an outhouse or two.

8 & 9 WORKSHOP & STABLE (Circa 1865)

Sometime after the magazine was completed a workshop (8), and a stable (9) were built on the side. Beneath the asphalt walkway are possibly the remains of narrow gauge tracks used to move powder, shot, and armament from the magazine down to the ships. The small rail cars were probably pulled by a mule or a horse.

10 BARRACK (Circa 1810)

The 1824 Inventory described this building as "... one and a half story for soldier barracks, containing three ground and three upper rooms - at one end a bake house - in good order."

11 CISTERN (Circa 1855)

The cistern is constructed of brick and mortar designed to hold about 90,000 gallons of water. Access to the water supply is through a trap door in the floor of the building. It is believed that this cistern provided a source of potable water to the citizens of Norfolk during the devastating yellow fever epidemic in 1855.

12 HORNWORK (Circa 1810)

Originally, this was the site of the hornwork serving to protect the rear of the Fort.